



## COMMUNITY STUDY

### City of Petal, Mississippi

The city of Petal is a rural community located outside of Hattiesburg in southeastern Mississippi. The city's population is 10,617, and the school district had an enrollment of 3,600 students during the 2008-2009 school year. Of these students, 82% were Caucasian, 15% black and 3% other. The district has a 53% free and reduced lunch rate, with the rate at the Primary (K-2) school being 61%. The community sought and attained EXCEL BY 5 early childhood certification as a population level three community.

## PROCESS

In February 2005, the city of Petal assembled community leaders with vested interests in early childhood development to form an Excel by 5 Community Coalition. The Petal School District served as the lead agency, and a staff member with the district's Family Resource Center assumed the role of Certification Manager. The first coalition members were divided into four focus areas that collected pertinent data as part of the community needs assessment and developed a plan of action to fulfill the certification requirements.

Petal's coalition then met quarterly with coalition members breaking into the focus areas and developing strategies to meet the certification requirements. Later, the focus groups met independently at separate times to conduct their work and then reported to the whole coalition on their progress in meeting certification requirements.

A final certification review was conducted in Petal in January 2007. A formal recognition ceremony and celebration, dubbed the first *EXCELebration*, was held Saturday, March 31, 2007, making Petal the first community to attain certification as an Excel by 5 Certified Early Childhood community. Their status as the first community to attain certification was recognized by the Mississippi State Superintendent of Education, both the House and Senate of the Mississippi State Legislature and the President of the United States.

## OUTCOMES FROM THE FOUR AREAS OF FOCUS

### COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

The Petal community developed a broad coalition of community leaders to advocate for young children. Petal has secured strong commitments and active participation from city officials, the mayor, the superintendent of schools, the Chamber of Commerce, ministers from diverse denominations, child care and Head Start center directors, local community service groups, as well as members of the medical, mental health and judicial systems.

- The Petal Coalition developed a continuation plan of action for early childhood that included a funding plan with support from the Petal School District, the city of Petal, fund-raising efforts by the local education foundation and grants. As a result of this plan, funding has increased from the school district, and the city approved allocation of a one-half mill tax revenue to support early childhood. The Foundation has begun an annual Children's Concert as a fund raiser, and Even Start funding has been secured.
- The annual Relay for Life incorporated a *Kiddie Lap* where children under age five follow the traditional Cancer Survivors' lap.
- The annual Kid's Health Fair has incorporated more specific screenings and information for families with pre-school age children.
- The city-wide *Read Across America Day* event now includes transportation for area child care centers, allowing for over 200 preschoolers to attend.
- Based on input from families in the community, additional events focusing on families with young children are now offered including children's playshops, family picnics, Excel by 5 night at a football game and a children's concert.

### FAMILY AND PARENT SUPPORT

Petal has increased programs and services for families as part of the Excel by 5 certification process.

- The existing Family Resource Center was relocated to a much larger site, and additional resources were added to allow for new services. A large meeting room is utilized for community meetings and parent workshops, a computer lab and workroom for preparing educational materials is available for families and teachers, as well as, a resource lending library and a book club for young children (*Itty Bitty Bookworm Store*).
- Additional family support services that are now housed in the Center include an early interventionist with the Health Department, a social worker, a Resource and Referral Center through the MS State Extension Service, and a local community college GED preparation program.
- The Resource Center also houses the Head Start program for three and four year olds and has expanded services by renovating a facility on campus to house an early Head Start program for teen moms.

- An early care and education coordinator has been employed to work with child care and Head Start centers in order to assist with aligning curriculum with the MS Department of Education Early Learning Guidelines and with transitioning into public Kindergarten.
- The existing *Parents as Teachers* program has been expanded through additional recruitment and utilization of community volunteers. This program offers monthly home visits with 130 families of young children. Most recently, the program has expanded with the addition of a parent educator offering expanded services to the teen parent population.
- The Petal Rotary Club has recently sponsored the Dolly Parton *Imagination Library* for families with newborns.
- A comprehensive Resource Directory has been developed and is included with other information for families identified through newborn packet bounce-back cards and through other means.

## EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

Petal greatly improved communication and collaboration among its childcare, Head Start and elementary school staff and increased the educational and training opportunities for early care providers in both homes and centers.

- Initial reviews of Petal's child care centers found that only 16% received 20 or more approved hours of professional development training per licensure year. With the location of the Mississippi State Resource and Referral Center on-site at the Petal Family Resource Center, 51% of early care providers received 20 approved hours of training. Trainings are now offered locally alleviating travel to training sites.
- As part of the Excel by 5 certification process, classrooms in five early childhood centers in Petal participated in a comprehensive environmental rating. The average rating of centers was 3.4 in the initial assessments. After technical assistance, increased training opportunities and additional resources, the average rating in the post assessments was 4.8.
- Before the Excel by 5 certification process, child care and Head Start Centers had limited opportunities to collaborate with the primary school. Since certification, an Early Care and Education Coordinator, working at the Family Resource Center, works with all pre-school centers in order to model appropriate practice and to assist with curriculum alignment and with incorporating the Mississippi Department of Education Early Learning Guidelines in the curriculum.
- Child Care directors and teachers met with Primary School administrators in the fall of 2009 to review Children's Progress Academic Assessment (CPAA) scores for the children who attended each pre-school/Head Start center the previous year. Professional development sessions are now planned to assist pre-school teachers in implementing appropriate learning activities to address identified areas of weakness. There is also discussion of expanding the use of the CPAA in pre-school/Head Start centers in coming years.
- The Petal School District has been chosen as a pilot for the EDI – Early Development Instrument – to measure Petal's children's readiness for school. The instrument was created and sponsored by National United Way and UCLA and is being funded in Petal by the Kellogg Foundation and the local United Way.
- Referral forms are used for kindergarten and pre-school teachers to refer families to the Center for Families and Children to access educational resources.

## HEALTH

With accessible health services in a neighboring community, the health focus has concentrated on linking families to early intervention services and on identified areas of concern including: car seat safety and obesity.

- With the *Parents as Teacher* program and the Health Department's First Steps program now housed at the Resource Center, developmental screenings are offered to families on-site. Having these services offered locally has greatly increased families accessing these services.
- The annual community Kid's Health Fair has expanded its focus on early childhood needs including developmental screenings, car seat safety checks, education about nutrition, fitness and obesity for young children, as well as mental health support.
- Petal's first pediatrician began serving families at a newly opened clinic. He has met with the Excel coalition to learn more about support services offered to families with young children and is currently referring families to the Center on a regular basis. He has agreed to serve in an advisory capacity with the coalition. The lack of pediatric services was identified as an area of need in the community assessment and was presented to the clinic administration.

## COMMUNITY'S UNIQUE FEATURES IMPACTING CERTIFICATION EFFORTS

- Petal has had one Excel By 5 certification manager consistently throughout the entire certification process, enabling it to have more stable and sustained progress in its efforts.
- Prior to EB5 certification, Petal School District had already established a family resource center with strong interest in improving early childhood services.
- Petal's implementation of its action plan was delayed due to the devastation that occurred during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.
- Petal established a close relationship with local print media who routinely have reported on its Excel by 5 certification progress. As a result, Petal's attainment of Excel by 5 certification was featured in the top 10 local news stories for 2007.
- Petal was able to garner greater support from its local city government than other pilot communities. Upon completing the pilot phase and attaining certification, the Board of Aldermen demonstrated an unusual financial commitment to ensure the continuation of the initiative in Petal by unanimously allocating ½ mill from the city budget. This has continued for the second year.
- Early Childhood Education was identified as one of four priority areas of focus during a feasibility study sponsored by the Petal Education Foundation.